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AUTHOR Cuccaro, Paula
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ABSTRACT

This study examined adolescents' influence on family decision making. The Decision Making Survey (DMS), a self-administered questionnaire, was created to present a variety of the decisions made within the family. Items on the DMS were categorized into eight domains of family life (entertainment, purchases, family environment/daily living activities, school-related activities, rules and regulation, conservation, finances, and politics/religion/social activism) to determine in which domains adolescents and their mothers perceived the adolescents to have a greater level of influence. The items on the DMS were also classified into two focus categories: adolescent-centered, which related directly to the adolescent, and family-centered, which related to other family members or the family as a whole. Participants were 111 ninth graders and their mothers. They were primarily white and from an upper middle class background. Generally, adolescents and their mothers perceived the adolescents to have differential influence based on domain of family life. Both adolescents and their mothers also perceived the adolescents to have higher levels of control over adolescent-centered items such as school-related activities than over family-centered items such as finances and conservation. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/EV)

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Perceptions of Adolescents' Influence in Family Decision Making

Paula Cuccaro, Ph.D.

Baylor College of Medicine

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ABSTRACT

The present study was an examination of adolescents' influence on family decision making. The Decision Making Survey (DMS), a self-administered questionnaire, was created to present a variety of the decisions made within the family. Items on the DMS were categorized into eight domains of family life to determine in which domains adolescents and their mothers perceived the adolescents to have a greater level of influence. The items on the DMS were also classified into two focus categories: "Adolescent-centered" which relates directly to the adolescent and "Family-centered" which relates to other family members or the family as a whole. Participants were 111 ninth grade students and their mothers. Participants were primarily white, from an upper middle-class background. Generally, adolescents perceived themselves to have greater influence than their mothers perceived them to have. Adolescents and their mothers perceived the adolescents to have differential influence based on domain of family life. Both adolescents and their mothers also perceived the adolescents to have higher levels of control over adolescent-centered items than over family-centered items. The implications of the findings for research on socialization and decision making are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that in today's society, socialization is more of a two-way street. Socialization in the family has typically been viewed as a process in which parents are influencing their children and adolescents (Baumrind, 1980; Maccoby, 1992). However, children and adolescents have an influence on parents which is not often discussed in the socialization literature of psychology (Lerner & Spanier, 1978; Minuchin, 1988). As children grow into adolescents, they develop specific cognitive and social competencies necessary to become an independent adult. Parents begin to allow their adolescents greater influence in more decisions, including those with greater consequences.

Researchers in marketing and consumer psychology have devoted significant attention to children's and adolescents' power as an influencer in the decisions made by a family. This attention is due to the fact that children and adolescents control to some degree where and how a large amount of the money in certain markets is spent. In fact, children and adolescents influence over $130 billion in purchases made by their parents (McNeal, 1992).

In influencing parents, the child or adolescent acts as both a passive and an active agent. In a passive role, the child's status or concerns may force parents to reevaluate certain values and priorities. For instance, an individual with children may be inclined to purchase a mini-van or station wagon instead of a two-seater sports car. Parents are exposed to new behavior settings (e.g., PTO meetings, after school sporting events, family restaurants, the children's section of the video store) and new roles (e.g., room mother, soccer coach, or carpool driver) due to the presence of the child and that child's centrality in the parents' thinking, planning, and attention. As the developing adolescent gains a wider range of experiences (Barker & Wright, 1955; White & Siegel, 1984) and begins to develop beliefs and values from exposure to other socializing agents, such as teachers, he or she becomes a more active influence on his or her parents. Such influences may involve an adolescents' influence on parents' everyday decisions (Baranowski, 1978) or on parental participation in particular activities (Peters, 1985).

Understanding the influence the adolescent has on the decision making of his or her family has significant implications for developmental psychology. The view of the family as a system with reciprocal relationships and influence has become widely accepted in more contextual theories of developmental psychology (e.g., Lerner & Tubman, 1991; Minuchin, 1991; Siegel & Cohen, 1991; White & Siegel, 1984). Without the understanding of the adolescent's influence on his or her parents, little can be said regarding the reciprocity of these relationships.

HYPOTHESES

1. Adolescents completing the Decision Making Survey (DMS) would perceive themselves as having greater influence overall than their mothers would perceive them to have.

2. Adolescents and their mothers would both perceive the adolescents as having differing influence for different domains. While no literature existed to support domain-specific predictions, it seemed reasonable that the following relationships would exist:

   a) adolescents and their mothers would perceive adolescents as having the highest level of influence over school-related activities and entertainment; and

   b) adolescents and their mothers would perceive the adolescents as having the least influence in politics/religion/social activism and rules and regulations.

   Since so little was known about the adolescents' influence in specific domains of family decision making, no predictions were made regarding the other four domains.

3. Perceptions of influence would be greater on the adolescent-centered items than on the family-centered items.

   a) Overall and in each domain, adolescents would perceive themselves as having greater influence on adolescent-centered DMS items than on family-centered DMS items.

   b) Overall and in each domain, mothers would perceive their adolescents as having greater influence on adolescent-centered DMS items than on family-centered DMS items.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 132 adolescents and their mothers. Adolescents were enrolled in a required decision-making course at a private high school in the Houston area. The majority of students take this course in 9th grade, however several 10th- and 11th-grade students (n = 7) were taking the course during this session. Forty-four percent of the adolescents were female while 56% were male. The mean age of the adolescents was 15.1 years (range: 14.2 - 17.5 years).

For the final sample, subjects were excluded for a variety of reasons including no matching parent data, father responding instead of mother, or the adolescent being in 10th or 11th grade. The remaining sample which was used for analysis included 111 adolescent-mother dyads. In the final sample, 45% (n = 50) of the adolescents were female while 55% (n = 61) were male. The mean age of these adolescents was 15.0 years (range: 14.2 - 16.2 years). The great majority of these adolescents were from white, upper-middle class backgrounds. Eighty-two percent of the adolescents were white, 7% Asian, 3% Black, 1% Hispanic, and 6% other which includes four adolescents of mixed ethnicities. Participating families were predominantly two-parent families (87%). Parents' education level was very high, with 87% of mothers and 93% of fathers having at least a college degree, and 33% of mothers and 60% of fathers having obtained a post-graduate degree. The majority of mothers (59%) and fathers (93%) worked outside the home or in a home-based business either full-time or part-time.

Materials

Materials included the Decision Making Survey (DMS) (adolescent and mother versions). The DMS was created to present a variety of decisions made within the family that encompass a broad range of family activities, e.g., choosing which TV programs are watched as a family, what type of stereo or computer is purchased for the family, or what time the adolescent goes to sleep on school nights. DMS items were classified into one of eight domains of family life: a) entertainment, b) purchases, c) family

environment/daily living activities, d) school-related activities, e) rules and regulations, f) conservation, g) finances, and h) politics/ religion/social activism. The DMS included 62 items and was designed as an exploratory research instrument. While the DMS has face validity, there are currently no extant reliability or other validity data.

For both the adolescent and the mother versions of the form, responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) no adolescent influence (adolescent version: "my parents decide this without discussing it with me"; mother version: "I decide this without discussing it with my child" to (5) total adolescent influence (adolescent version: "I decide this without discussing it with my parents"; mother version: "my child decides this without discussing it with me").

Procedure

Data Collection

Adolescents' and mothers' data packets were prepared so that an identification number was placed on each questionnaire in both packets so that their data could be matched.

Data Collection: Adolescents. On the first day of the decision making class, prior to receiving any course material, adolescents' data packets were distributed and the identification numbers were recorded by the course instructor to verify that the identification number on the mothers' data packets (which were distributed later) matched the identification number on the adolescent's data packet. Adolescents were asked to complete the questionnaires during the class period. The forms took approximately 35 minutes to complete. The adolescents were instructed that they would receive extra credit in the class for returning their packets, whether or not they participated in the study.

Data Collection: Mothers. After the adolescents had completed and handed in their data packets, the mothers' data packets were distributed and the adolescents were asked to take them home for their mothers to complete. Mothers were asked to complete the questionnaires included in their packets at their earliest convenience and return them to the adolescent in the provided envelope. The forms took approximately 40 minutes to complete.

Adolescents returned the mothers' data packets to the classroom teacher within one week. Adolescents received extra credit for returning the mothers' data packets even if the forms were not completed. Completed forms were received from all 132 adolescents enrolled in the course (100%) and from 127 (96.2%) of their parents.

Calculation of Decision Making Scores

Overall involvement scores were calculated for each adolescent based on the adolescent's responses to all 62 DMS items. Overall involvement scores were also calculated for each adolescent based on the mother's responses to the DMS. Scores were created by summing responses to all questions and then

dividing by the number of non-missing responses. This formula took into account that each item might not be applicable for every participant and that a participant might not answer every item.

Domain scores by summing responses to all questions within a given domain and then dividing by the number of non-missing responses to the questions within the domain. Each domain had a different number of items, so this formula took into account the number of possible items in a domain as well as the fact that a participant might not answer every item.

Focus scores (adolescent-centered vs. family-centered) were created by summing responses to all questions within a focus and then dividing by the number of non-missing responses. This formula took into account the number of possible items in a focus as well as the fact that a participant might not answer every item.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for the adolescents' and mothers' overall and domain scores on the DMS are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Adolescents' and Mothers' Overall DMS Scores and Domain Scores

Score	n Items	Adolescent		Mother	
		M	SD	M	SD
Overall DMS	62	3.4	0.3	2.9	0.4
School-Related Activities	10	4.3	0.5	3.9	0.5
Family Environment/Daily Living	10	3.6	0.5	3.2	0.4
Entertainment	4	3.6	0.4	3.0	0.5
Rules and Regulations	15	3.5	0.5	3.0	0.5
Purchases	6	3.4	0.4	3.0	0.4
Finances	7	3.0	0.6	2.6	0.5
Politics/Religion/Social Activism	5	2.7	0.6	2.7	0.5
Conservation	5	2.2	0.8	2.0	0.7

In support of the first hypothesis, adolescents perceived themselves to have greater influence overall on the DMS than their mothers perceived them to have, $t\,(110) = 13.23$, $p < .0001$. This finding confirmed the findings of other decision making research, e.g., Smetana (1995). For the remainder of the data analyses, adolescents and mothers were considered separately since they are very likely experiencing two distinct realities even though they are inhabiting the same "behavior settings" (Barker & Wright, 1955).

A mixed two-factor within-subjects (or split plot) design using BMDP2V (BMDP Statistical Software, 1992) with gender as the between-subjects factor and domain as the within-subject factor, was

conducted on the domain scores of all subjects. Two separate analyses were conducted on the domain scores - one for the adolescent's self-perceptions and one for the mother's perceptions of her adolescent.

For the analysis of the adolescents' domain scores, neither the main effect of gender, nor the gender x domain interaction was significant. However, the main effect of domain was highly significant $F(7,749) = 193.44$, $p < .0001$, indicating that adolescents perceived that they had greater influence in some domains relative to others.

Bonferroni multiple comparisons on the adolescents' domain scores indicated the following relationships between the domains: Adolescents perceived the greatest influence in school-related activities. They perceived their influence in family environment/daily living, entertainment, rules and regulations, and purchases domains to be equivalent and significantly greater than their influence in finances, which in turn was greater than their influence in politics/religion/social activism which was greater than their influence in conservation.

A similar analysis was conducted on the mothers' domain scores. For the analysis of the mothers' domain scores, no main effect of gender was found. The gender x domain interaction was significant, $F(7, 756) = 2.21$, $p < .05$, and the main effect of domain was highly significant $F(7, 756) = 199.78$, $p < .0001$, indicating that mothers perceived that their adolescents had greater influence in some domains relative to others and the perceived influence differed by gender. Due to the significant interaction effect, analysis of the mothers' domain scores had to be considered separately by gender for the Bonferroni multiple comparisons.

The method of calculation of the estimated standard error used for the Bonferroni multiple comparisons of the mothers' domain scores split by gender was advocated by Milliken and Johnson (1984) and corrected for the number of comparisons being made. The Bonferroni multiple comparisons of the mothers' domain mean scores for their daughters indicated that mothers perceived their daughters to have the greatest influence in school-related activities. Mothers perceived no significant differences between

the means for family environment/daily living, entertainment, and purchases. Nor were there significant differences between the means for entertainment, purchases, rules and regulations, and politics.

The Bonferroni multiple comparisons of the mothers' domain mean scores for their sons indicated that mothers perceived their sons to have the greatest influence in school-related activities. Mothers perceived no significant differences between the means for family environment/daily living, rules and regulations, entertainment, and purchases. Nor were there significant differences between the means for finances and politics/religion/social activism. Mothers perceived their sons to have the least influence in the conservation domain.

It had been hypothesized that adolescents would perceive themselves, and be perceived by their mothers, as having differing influence over different domains, with the greatest influence in school-related activities and entertainment and the least influence in politics/religion/social activism and rules and regulations. The hypothesis was only partially supported since adolescents had greater influence than anticipated over items in the rules and regulations domain.

In direct support of hypothesis 3, adolescents perceived their influence over adolescent-centered (AC) DMS items to be greater than their influence over family-centered (FC) DMS items, $t(110) = 38.21$, $p < .0001$. Because the mothers' FC scores were not normally distributed, the Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks test, a nonparametric test, was used. Mothers also perceived adolescents' influence in AC items to be greater than adolescents' influence over FC items of the DMS, $T = 9.09$, $p < .0001$.

DISCUSSION

Family decisions are complex and are influenced by a number of factors. As the data analyses for this study proceeded and the mean responses to the individual DMS items were ranked, it became clear that family decisions have a number of features, only two of which were included in the present study: domain and focus. Other components of family decisions that also deserve study include: how often the decision is made (frequency); whether the effects of the decision are immediate, short-term or long-term (duration); and the severity of consequences of the decision (riskiness).

The frequency with which a decision is made appeared to be related to the amount of influence adolescents perceived themselves to have. Fifteen of the 23 decisions over which adolescents had predominant influence were decisions made relatively often, i.e., at least once a week. The ranking of mean responses also suggested that adolescents have more influence over decisions with few serious consequences than they do over decisions with more serious consequences attached to them. The adolescents in this sample are at an age where they are developing greater autonomy. It is possible that parents are allowing them greater control over frequently-made and less consequential decisions as the adolescents demonstrate adequate decision making skills. Previous research has demonstrated that during the transition into adolescence, parents begin allowing their adolescents to make more autonomous decisions (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

The guided participation that Rogoff (1990) talks about in children appears to continue into adolescence and is focused on social development such as developing responsibility and logical reasoning skills. As adolescents become more autonomous, parents model appropriate decision making behaviors in an effort to teach them good decision making skills, e.g., information selection or considering the consequences of a decision. Adolescents appeared to have more influence over decisions that are relatively immediate or short-term (e.g., saving money for the short term) than they do over more long-term decisions (e.g., saving for a college education). Decisions involving a greater degree of risk or

greater consequences were either shared decisions or influenced more by parents (e.g., whether or not the adolescent can drink alcohol). It may be that parents are using shared decision making of decisions that they consider important as the next level of scaffolding in the adolescents' socialization. Future research should examine the different components of decisions and their implications for adolescents' influence in family decision making.

Allison, Jordan, and Yeatts (1992) argue that "although there have been numerous important advances in our understanding of decision processes, very little is known about the *types* of decisions that people make and consider to be most important" (p. 50). The present research adds to our understanding of the types of decisions made in the family. Although the decisions studied for this research are largely pragmatic, these decisions are the types of decisions made in families on an everyday basis and are representative of "real-world" family living. Adolescents' influence in these decisions, as perceived by themselves and by their mothers, extended across the majority of the domains included in this research, imparting a significant amount of influence to the adolescent.

The present research represents a two-dimensional photograph of a group of same age adolescents and their mothers at a particular moment in time. What is needed now is a motion picture, an active linking of snapshots to provide a more full-blooded understanding of the dimensions of family decisions and the role the adolescent plays in making them. Extending the research both cross-sectionally and longitudinally will help move us toward such a multidimensional and dynamic representation of family decision making.

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